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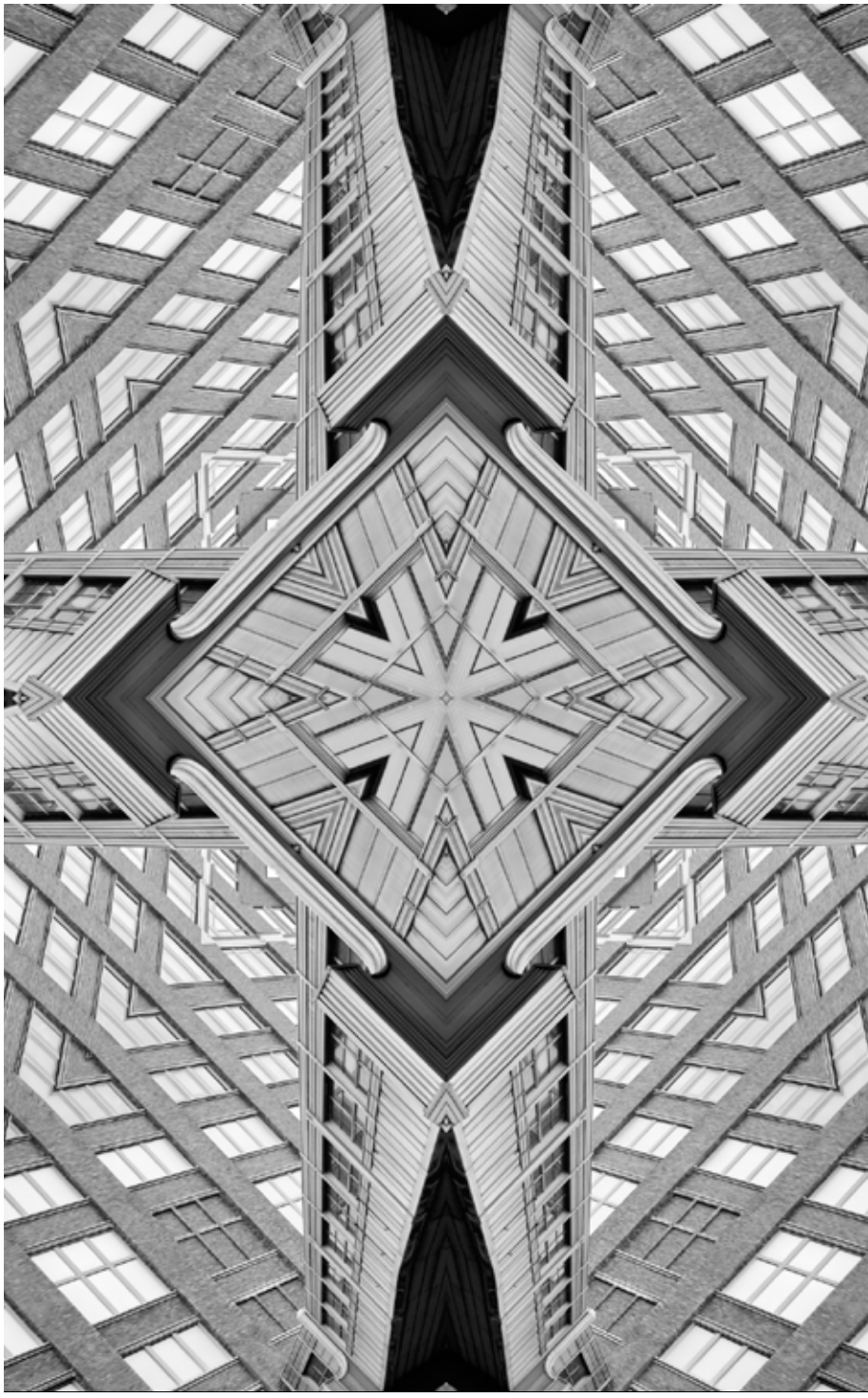

Locating the Madrasa in 21st-Century India

Ayjaz Wani and Rasheed Kidwai

Abstract

Madrasas in India offer basic literacy to millions of mostly poor Muslims, generally free of cost; they also serve as safe spaces for the preservation of Islamic culture. In many areas across the country, madrasas are the only option for poor Muslim families to provide their children basic education. This brief evaluates current madrasa education in India and identifies specific weaknesses that hamper its modernisation. It recommends remedial measures for improving madrasas and making them enablers of development for the Muslim community. The brief calls for reforms in legislation, better infrastructure, and improving teacher capacities.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States (US) in 2001, researchers, analysts, and policymakers trained their eyes on madrasas.[a] Their initial investigations at the time found that many Taliban leaders and Al-Qaeda members had been radicalised in these Islamic educational institutions. In July 2004, a report prepared by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United Sates (or the 9-11 Commission) described madrasas as "incubators of violent extremism."[1] It did not specifically say, however, whether any of the 19 individuals who had executed the 9-11 attacks themselves attended madrasas for their education.[2] The following year, then Secretary of Defence Donald H. Rumsfeld declared that madrasas "train people to be suicide killers and extremists, violent extremists."[3] Subsequently, such a narrative around madrasas made these institutions easy targets of criticism, even as analyses have shown that out of the 79 terrorists involved in the five worst attacks on Western democracies,[b] only eleven percent of them had madrasa education.[4] Madrasas in India are the subject of similar criticism, with students being branded as "terrorists".[5]

Madrasas are an integral component of the education system in India. A primary reason is that historically, the country's Muslim population have been disproportionately disadvantaged in education. Even as they comprise nearly 13 percent of India's population, their enrolment rate at the primary school level (Class 1-5) was a meagre 9.39 percent of total enrolment figures for 2006. More than 90 percent of madrasa students in India belong to poor families.[6] In some parts of the country, even poor non-Muslims send their children to these schools.[7]

a 'Madrasa' is the Arabic word for any educational institution. In this brief, 'madrasa' refers to any institution of education, especially primary or secondary education imparting Islamic religious education.

b These include the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the African Embassy bombings in 1998, the September 11 attacks, the Bali nightclub bombings in 2002, and the London bombings on July 7, 2005. See: Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey (2006), The Madrassa Scapegoat, *The Washington Quarterly* 29(2), pp. 117–125.

Introduction

These institutions are facing massive challenges in finances and are in desperate need of reforms. There is a lack of scientific and secular subjects in the curriculum, and graduates find it difficult to find employment.[c,8] The government recognises the need to "modernise" India's madrasas. In 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, "The Government of India is leaving no stone unturned in empowering the Muslim youth. We want them to have the Quran in one hand and a computer in the other."[9] Progress has not been made so far, however, and indeed, some state governments have derecognised the madrasas in their jurisdictions or dropped Islamic subjects from these institutions.[10]

This brief examines the state of madrasa education in India. It asks whether madrasas could succeed in giving equal emphasis to secular, scientific and religious education, and offers recommendations for the way forward.

> "Government promises that India's Muslim youth will have 'the Quran in one hand and a computer in the other.'"

c All madrasas in India except a few like those in the states of Kerala and Maharashtra follow a universal curriculum.

After the 9th century, as Islam spread across different continents, Islamic education also thrived through Sufis,[d] rulers and missionaries. In that era, it was the Islamic educational system[e] that provided the much-needed socio-administrative officers for Muslim empires, such as the Qazis[f] and mullahs.[g] Ibn Sina, regarded as the greatest scholar of the medieval ages, records that besides *Qur'an*, the Maktabas taught metaphysics, language, *adab*,[h] ethics, and manual skills. Most of the madrasas provided instructions in the religious sciences and rational or intellectual sciences like the principles for interpretation of *hadith*[i] and biography of the last Prophet.[11] Subsequently , beginning in the 12th century, many madrasas in Central Asia, and especially those of the Ottoman Turks, were keen to explore subjects dealing with the rational sciences.

Some Islamic empires developed madrasa education on the basis of a rational curriculum. The schools taught diverse subjects including logic, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, poetry, history, geography, Quranic studies, Jurisprudence (Fiqh), and Islamic law.[12] These Islamic empires engaged in the exchange of textbooks on the basis of their specialisation. For example, most of the textbooks for astronomy, logic and mathematics for madrasas in the Ottoman Empire[j] came from Turkestan and Persia. Some textbooks on geography were brought in from Europe.[13] Some of the madrasas were also known for their instructions of arts and craft. Bukhara and Samarkand[k] became famous educational centres. Bukhara was called "the dome of Islam", and was home to famous theologians like Al-Bukhari and Al-Termazi.[14] Students from half of what was 'Asia' at that time attended these institutions. Of the 180 madrasas in Bukhara, most were known for imparting education in medicine.[15] Scholars such as Muḥammad ibn Musa Al Khwarizmi, Abu Nasr Al-Farabi and

d Follower of mystical Islamic belief and practitioner who seeks the divine through love, knowledge and direct personal experience of God.

e The Maktaba provided primary education and the Madrasa, higher studies.

f A Muslim judge who renders decisions according to the Sharīʿah (Islamic law). In the Indian context, the Qazi's jurisdiction is confined to civil matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance etc in the lines of the teachings of Quran and Hadith.

g A Muslim title or honorific attached to a scholar or religious leader who has academic knowledge of Quran and Hadith.

h Literature used in the modern Arab world to signify "literature distinguished by its broad humanitarian concerns.

i Record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qurʾān, the holy book of Islam.

j Ottoman Empire during it zenith encompassed most of southeastern Europe to the gates of Vienna, including present-day Hungary, the Balkan region, Greece, and parts of Ukraine; portions of the Middle East now occupied by Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Egypt; North Africa as far west as Algeria; and large parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

k These historical cities are in present-day Uzbekistan.

Al-Biruni received their formal education in these madrasas, many of which the Europeans referred to as "universities".[16] In Central Asia, the Islamic educational institutions succeeded in transforming Islamic culture and making it richer, more adaptable and universal than its Arabic roots.[17]

Most of these madrasas were supported by religious endowments. They were established on rent on lands given to them for free and were present in every major town during the late 19th century. They were administered through *akhund* (principal), *mudarris* (teachers), *mutawalli* (steward). Students were given free accommodation and food. Well-to-do students paid tuition fees, and poor students worked for the school and received financial assistance from the college's charitable foundation. These madrasas made Muslim cities flourish with math, science, medicine, culture and economics.[18] The students of these madrasas gave the world devices that could read the stars, al-Razi in surgical instruments and dissection, and Al-Khwarizmi's algebra (named after the Arabic word "al-jabr"). Ibn Sina's book, "The Canon of Medicine" was used in all the medical schools of Europe until the advent of modern sciences in the 17th century.[19]

In India, the Islamic educational system developed after the 10th century. The first maktabas and madrasas were established in Sind, Dabel, Mansura and Multan (in present-day Pakistan), and eventually they spread to different parts of the sub-continent.[20] These madrasas focused on *fiqh* [methodologies of jurisprudence], the details of Islamic jurisprudence, until the 16th century when Mughal Emperor Akbar introduced philosophy and logic and other "rational disciplines" (*ma'qulat*). The strictly "religious" disciplines were mostly peripheral.[21] Muslim reformists like Shah Waliullah and Mulla Nizamuddin tried to introduce scientific education in the madrasas, but failed because of opposition from the orthodox view.[22] With the establishment of British rule in the mid-19th century, the vernacular and madrasa education faced an existential threat. The East India Company, in 1832 replaced Persian with English as the official language of correspondence in the territories under its control. The qazis and Ulemas employed by the state were replaced by judges trained in British law. The application of Muslim law was restricted to personal affairs, though Sharia was never introduced fully by any Mughal ruler or even earlier. Madrasas gradually lost their relevance, and royal patronage and the steady stream of finances to these religious institutions got restricted. To enhance the employability of madrasa graduates in the face of modern education and new administrative apparatus, Muslim leaders and modern educationists like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1818-1898) and his contemporary Fazlur Rehman tried to introduce rational and modern education in these educational institutions.[23]

These thinkers started the Aligarh Movement in the 19th century under the leadership of Sir Syed to institute reforms in Muslim education in British India. Such would be the impact of these reformed madrasas that prominent national figures including social reformer Raja Ram Mohon Roy, author Munshi Premchand, and the first president of independent India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, received their education in madrasas.[24]

However, another movement, the Muslims-supported Deoband favoured Islam-centric education in the madrasas.[25] After the first war of independence of 1857, the Deoband School, even as it opposed British rule, rejected modern scientific education. Founded in 1866, the Deoband Islamic seminary and Deobandi madrasas were seen by Muslims of that era as a "fort of Islam" amidst the westernisation of British India. Deobandi scholars and clergy mistook science as their enemy's [British] friend, and marked the closing of doors to modern knowledge even after independence.[26]

This approach had perhaps cost the Muslim community dearly. If the Deobandis had taught science, mathematics, English and other modern subjects with the same zeal as they had in the preaching of Islam, it would have had an impact on the socio-economic life of Muslims in India. However, the Ulemas simply used the era for their advantage, and the eventual rise of Sunni Muslim sects like Deobandi and Barelvi were the consequence of this new dependence of the ordinary Muslims on the ulema.[27]

The serious intervention in the madrasa education started in the last decade of the 20th century. The government of India in 1993 recognised the need to modernise madrasas, and the P V Narasimha Rao government tried to instil a sense of security among the country's second largest majority after the demolition of the Babri Masjid that triggered communal riots across many parts of India. The National Committee for Minorities Education was also set up in 2004 to look into how the conditions of madrasas in various states can be improved. The Central government after 2009 launched various initiatives including the Modernization of Madrasa Schemes (MOMS) and the Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas (SPQEM) to introduce more rational subjects in these schools.[28] The government of India started a scheme of Infrastructure Development in Minority Institutes (IDMI)[29] for unaided minority schools at the national level, but was voluntary in nature.

Today, the pedagogical methods and curriculum of madrasas in India remain outdated and in need of serious scrutiny if they are to be instruments of development for the Muslim population. Influential religious orders[l] are still against the modernisation of madrasa education. Justice M S A Siddiqui, who headed the National Council for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI) from the time of its inception in 2004 till 2014, had wide-ranging interactions with many religious leaders in his quest to arrive at an informal consensus for setting up a National Madrasa Board. He was told by the orthodox religious leader who looked after these institutions that the job of madrasas was not to produce doctors and engineers, but to "harvest spiritual leaders" who can act as "moral guardians" for the people.[30] Most religious leaders argued that just as a professional medical and engineering college graduate was not being questioned about the lack of "morality education" content in their syllabi, the madrasas cannot be held suspect for the absence of modern scientific education.[31]

> "In the 19th century, the Aligarh Movement instituted reforms in Muslim education, only to be later rejected by the Deoband School."

l There are many religious sects in India. They are Sunnis, Shias, Bohras, Khojas, and Sufis, among them, who run their religious and educational institutions.

Current State of Madrasas in India

In the 21st century most of the madrasa schools around the globe have adopted scientific curriculum that have increased the employability of their students. The Singaporean madrasa system, for example, has begun using modern technologies like tablets.[32]

According to information provided by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, India has 24,010 madrasas, of which 4,878 were unrecognised, in 2018-19.[33]Unofficially it is claimed that only one organisation, Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind has over 20,000 Deobandi madrasas in north India.[34] Madrasas in India are largely run by private religious sects. However, in six states – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bengal and Assam—a large number of madrasas are state-funded. They are the equivalent of mainstream education and their certificates are also at par with the school boards—this enhances the employability of madrasa-educated children. For example, in the four states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh the number of recognised madrasas is 10,680, with some 2,020,816 students.[35] The Sachar Committee report,[m] meanwhile, said that the number of students attending madrasas is less than commonly held.[36] In Bengal, for instance, where the Muslim population is more than 25 percent of the state's population, there are only 341,000 madrasa students, or 4 percent of those between 7-19.[37]

The following paragraphs describe some of the most fundamental challenges facing India's madrasas.

Curriculum

A section of conservative Muslim clergy has been opposing the introduction of scientific and modern education every time the central government had attempted to amend the curriculum and improve teaching methods.[38] To be sure, the state of madrasas across India is varied. For example, while madrasas in the northern part of India, particularly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have not adopted more modern curricula, those in Kerala are different—they are of the view that there is no separation of knowledge in Islam, and that the

m On 9 March 2005, the PMO had issued the Notification for constitution of the High Level Committee for preparation of Report on the Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India. The Terms of Reference are appended to this Report. The Committee was to consolidate, collate and analyse the above information to identify areas of intervention by the Government to address relevant issues relating to the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community. The committee was headed by Justice Rajindar Sachar and the report was released in November 2006.

Prophet did not divide learning on the basis of what was "sacred" and what was "secular". Indeed, Kerala's Muslim tradition has other elements that do not conform to those in other regions of India. For example, Kerala's Nadwat ul Mujahideen believes that there is no official clergy in Islam, and that a doctor or a management professional can lead a prayer. The Friday sermons in Kerala are read in the vernacular, Malayalam, while in the north Indian states, they are in Arabic and not translated to either Urdu or Hindi. Nadwat ul Mujahideen is a Salafi-influenced Islamic group in Kerala that has roots dating back to the 19th century. Founded in 1924, this renaissance group has been opposing the Sunni orthodoxy and their alleged 'false beliefs' such as polytheism. Nadwat ul Mujahideen claims to introduce 'true' Islamic practices to the Muslim community in Kerala. Nadvath ul Mujahideen also says it is catering to the state's Muslims to create their own characteristics and peculiarities that distinguish them from other Muslim communities in India.

Funding

Funding for madrasas mostly come from the religious orders. There are also Waqf boards[n] that offer some financial support. At present, there is no institutional mechanism whereby charity funds such as *zakat*[o] and *sadqa*[p] are channelled to madrasas. Madrasas that are affiliated with religious sects or seminaries like Darul Uloom Deoband, Nadwa tul Ulema, Jamaat E Islami, or Jamiat e Ulema, are generally better able to manage their institutions financially.

A crucial issue is that a large number of madrasas in India belong to the unorganised sector which depends on charity from the Muslim community. The funding of these unorganised-sector madrasas is meagre and erratic, with more reliable inflows of financial support coming only during the month of Ramadan. Consequently, the lack of adequate funds results in shortages in the basic requirements to run the school. For example, many students in these under-funded madrasas could not even have proper clothing. Teachers are also not being paid appropriate remuneration.[39] Compounding the situation is the absence of transparency in both the funds received, and the expenditure.

n Waqf provided a legal way to circumvent the Sharī'ah's requirement that an individual's estate be divided among many heirs. Through a waqf, an individual could endow an institution or group with all or part of his estate, in perpetuity, before his death. In India, state-run waqf boards have been set up to deal with waqf-related issues and administer them.

o An obligatory tax required of Muslims, one of the five Pillars of Islam. The 2.5 percent zakat is levied on various categories of property—money, gold and movable goods payable each year after one year's possession.

p Voluntary almsgiving, which, like zakat, is intended for the needy.

Teacher quality

The dire financial situation affects teacher quality, as the pay-scale fails to attract individuals who may be better qualified. Many teachers do not meet the rudimentary qualification of having a Bachelor's degree in Education. Often, teachers who may be educated and trained to teach humanities or language end up handling science and mathematics subjects in madrasas run by the SPQEM.[40] The teachers also find themselves needing to depend on the conventional methods used in learning Quran and other religious texts. Moreover, the madrasas that receive government funds also contend with the problem of lack of textbooks. In 2018, for example, the state of Uttar Pradesh reported that the amount of INR 470.920 million was not released. The grants have been irregular and inadequate, leading to the closure of the scheme in madrasas. It has been pointed out that such erratic funding is also due to the delayed submission of Utilization Certificates by the states to the Centre.[41]

Lack of wholistic learning

Most madrasas have no concept of organising social gatherings or extracurricular activities like field trips that could give students an experiential learning. Children are enrolled in madrasas mostly so that they could have an assured meal for the day, and they would be able to read the Quran.[42] But real-life exposure is needed, as it could help children studying in madrasas to imbibe a more integrated learning. After all, madrasas in India continue to be huge thought-influencers. For example, a small four percent of all madrasa students can create an impact on the entire Muslim population of India when it comes to religious matters: this four percent are the imams who lead prayers in hundreds and thousands of mosques spread across the country. During Fridays, these imams give out sermons that can be used to convey socio-political commentary and influence the formulation of public opinion.

Current State of Madrasas in India

The most important religious body, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, which runs most of the Deobandi madrasas has set up a committee of Muslim scholars and educators to prepare a roadmap for introducing a modern curriculum to madrasas in India.[43] These same Deobandi schools, along with the Ahl-e-Hadis institutions, have repeatedly refused to take part in various initiatives started by a succession of union governments after 1993. At the same time, however, they have benefited from the allocation of funds for state-run madrasas. The decision of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind to diversify madrasa education is motivated by considerations for the future employment prospects of Muslim children, and overall, the socio-economic progress of the community.[44]

In West Bengal, former governor Dr A R Kidwai in 2002 issued an exhaustive report on madrasa education in the state, giving practical recommendations to the state government for standardising the madrasa education system. The report, however, has only gathered dust throughout the Left-led Buddhadeb Bhattacharya regime (2002-2011) and that of Mamata Banerjee (2011-present).[45]

The National Educational Policy (1986) has stressed on the need to liberalise education for the welfare of the marginalised sections of society. The imperative could be more acute for the madrasa system, as the Sachar Committee report findings show that Muslims are the most educationally backward community in the country.

> “A small 4% of madrasa students influence India’s entire Muslim population: as imams who give out sermons that can help formulate public opinion.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The government of Prime Minister Modi has declared its commitment to the introduction of rational and scientific education in madrasas. Efforts have to be made in the areas of planning, legislation and implementation.

The following points summarise this brief's recommendations for enabling madrasas in India to respond to the needs of the 21st century.

1. **Standardise the system of madrasa education**. The issue of 'standardisation' is contentious. In an interview conducted by the authors of this brief with Justice M S A Siddiqui, former chairperson of the National Council for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI), he insisted that there was a near consensus[q] on the standardisation of madrasa system and mainstreaming madrasa education to create an inclusive atmosphere, promote social justice, tolerance and economic development. Justice Siddiqui acknowledged that there were procedural and legal hurdles, but he said those could be overcome in a "spirit of consensus and accommodation." The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) can play a pivotal role in integrating madrasa education and cater to the needs of learners up to pre-degree level. Modern subjects should be integrated into the madrasa system. Begin the standardisation of madrasa education in a specific state as a pilot, before eventually scaling.

2. **Establish a Central Madrassa Board (CMB).** Such an autonomous body can aid in the creation of a standardised curriculum and encourage madrasas to pursue academic studies at par with state boards. Bihar, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh have state madrasa boards running successfully where madrasa students get certificates equivalent to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Advertisements of teaching posts through CMB and even the qualifications for the teachers can be rationalised by this board. The Sachar Commission's recommendation of modernisation of madrasas has remained merely a slogan. Institutions continue to remain fund-starved to pay for salary of mathematics, science and computer teachers. Unlike in the Christian missionary educational institutions, community funding by Muslims for madrasa education is both erratic and meagre. The CMB should be set up by an act of parliament. The board should not interfere with the religious curriculum of an affiliated madrasa but should stress on the introduction of scientific education. What is required is a balance of science, life and spirituality, vocational training, art of living, developing scientific temperament, secular-democratic outlook,

q Jamiat-e-Ulema was the only and notable opposition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

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and computer education. Madrasas need to invest in technological innovations as well.[46]

3. **Improve teacher quality.** Any system of education is only as good as its teachers. The present conditions of most teachers in madrasas is pitiable: their salaries are irregular, they have no pay-scales or avenues for career advancement. The central government should allocate money for teacher capacity-building through the CMB for different schemes like SPQEM, MOMS, IDMI. Teaching orientation programmes for madrasa teachers are imperative to usher in modernisation. Madrasa teachers need wider exposure to current discourses in public life and geo-political trends, and must learn advanced teaching methods, as well as other skills like counselling.

4. **Rationalise faculty.** The proposed CMB and the state madrasa boards can consider setting up a centralised faculty of social sciences to teach subjects like economics, history, political science, and broader trends in foreign policy. Separate faculties in educational technology, mass communication, computer education and orientation centres should also be set up to have distinctive programmes and a character of their own. Collaborations with various educational centres of excellence should be conducted.

5. **Help madrasas assimilate their 'Indian' identity.** The government of India would do well to help madrasas use their institutions in teaching Indian Muslims to assimilate their identity as 'Indian' and 'Muslim', together—on the basis of a shared sense of history, culture and language. This can be along the lines of Singapore's deradicalisation programme. After all, the foundations of a nation-state having broad religious, cultural and linguistic diversity should not be built on religious nationalism.

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